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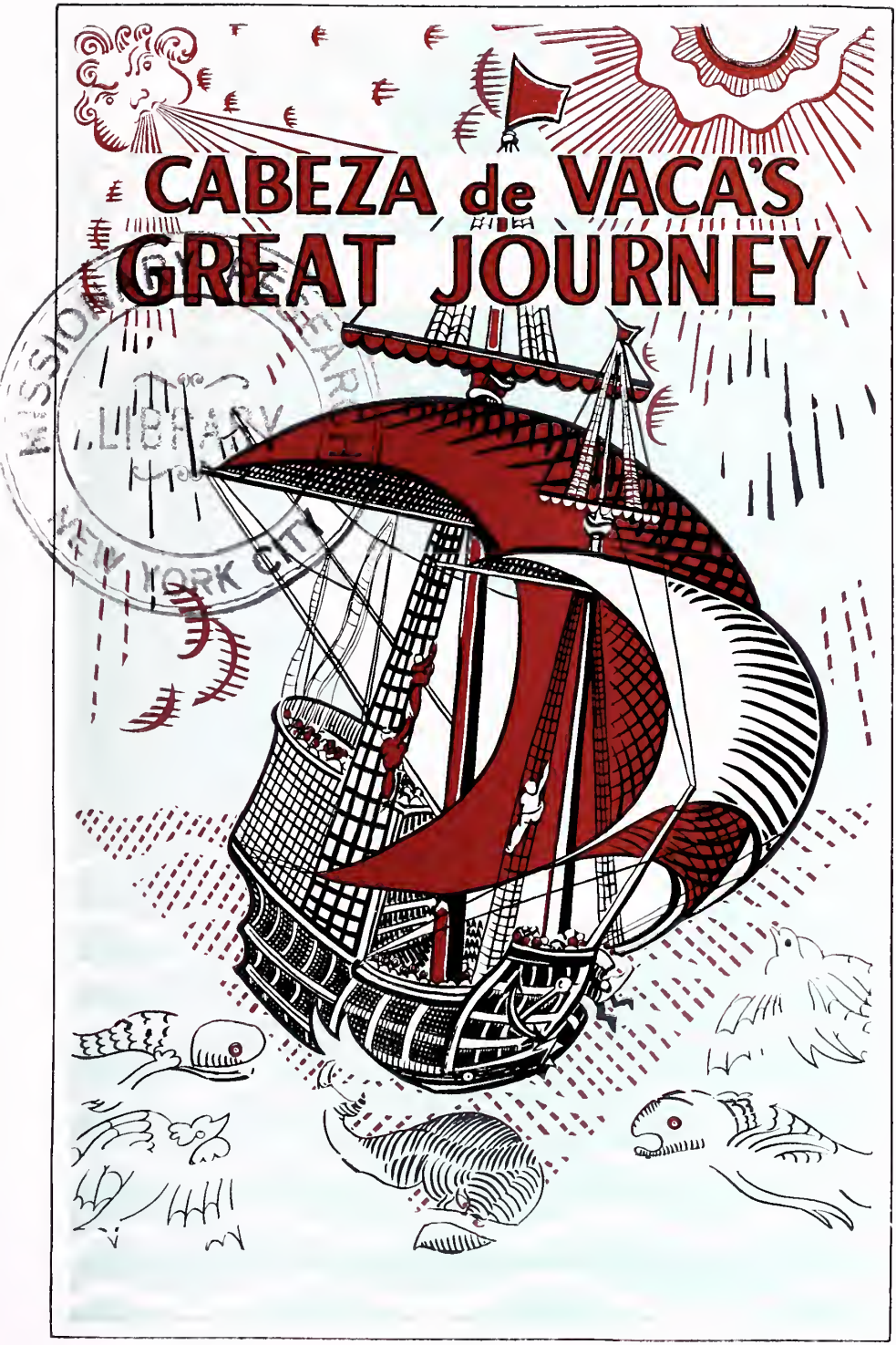
CABEZA de VACA'S GREAT JOURNEY



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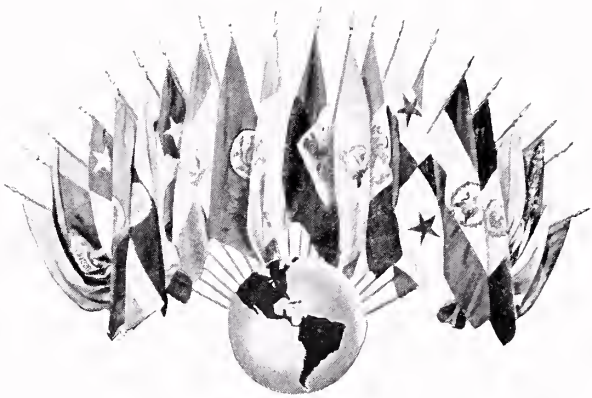

The Americas

A Continent of Friendly Nations

CABEZA DE VACA'S GREAT JOURNEY

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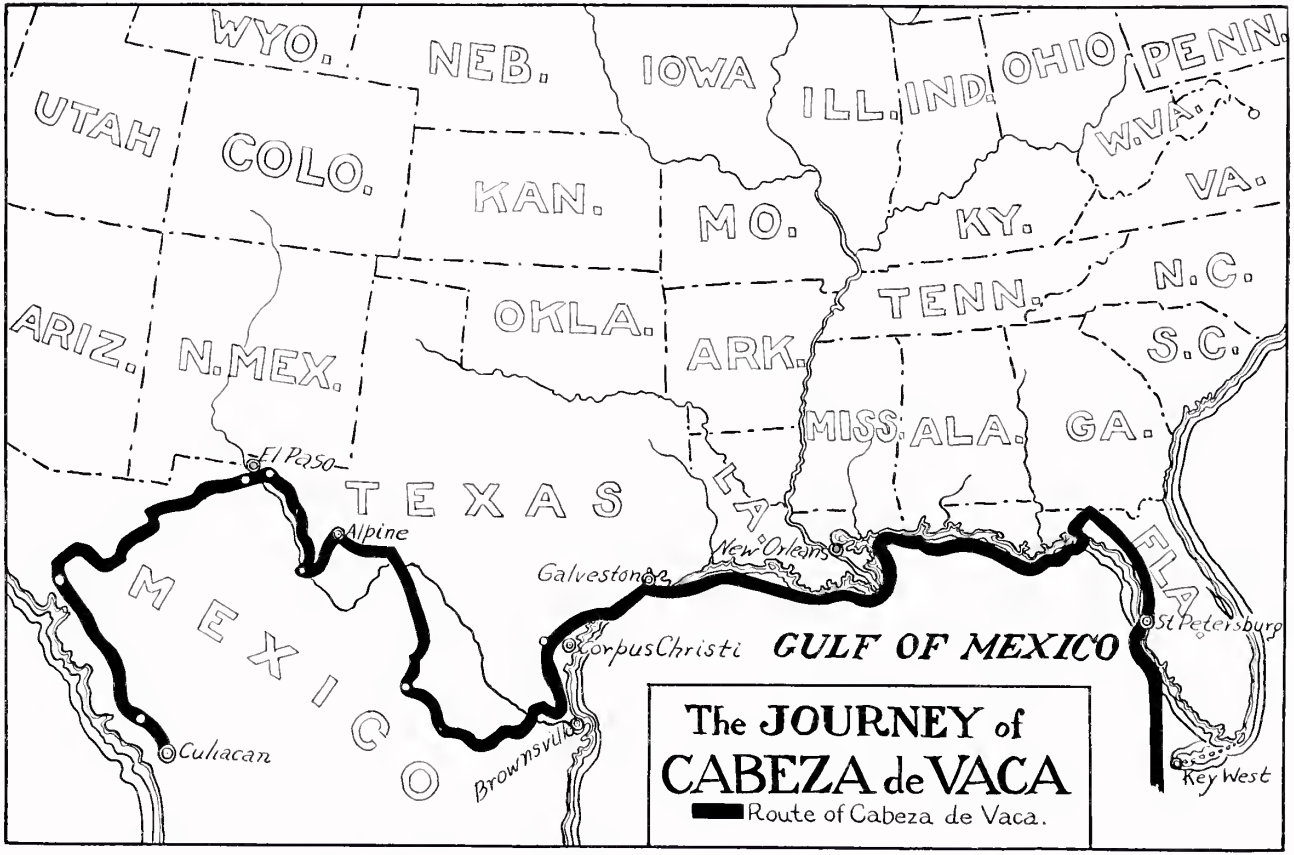

Adapted from Morris Bishop's The Odyssey of Cabeza de Vaca
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THIS STORY BEGINS IN SPAIN, in the ancient city of Cádiz, a place of sunshine and sherry and Moorish traditions. There, about the time that Columbus discovered the New World, a little boy was born and named Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. The last name, Cabeza de Vaca, means cow's head. Almost three centuries before he was born, one of Álvar's forefathers marked a mountain pass in Spain with the bleached skull of a cow, then guided the Spanish troops through it to surprise and defeat their enemies, the Moors. This act won him the name, Cabeza de Vaca.

Like most of the sons of important families, young Cabeza de Vaca very early began his military career. He was already an experienced soldier when in 1527 he sailed westward with an expedition to conquer Florida and the land westward and south into Mexico. A year later he was one of four hundred men who landed near what is now Tampa Bay, on the western coast of Florida. They had forty lean horses and almost no provisions. The adventurers imagined that they would find treasures richer than those Cortés had taken from the empire of the Aztecs.

Cabeza de Vaca wrote the story of his adventures more than four hundred years ago. In it he tells of hardships in an unfriendly land, an attempt to escape by sea, shipwreck, his survival, lonely years spent with the Indians in Texas and, finally, of his journey afoot to the Gulf of California. In addition to his own experiences, Cabeza de Vaca's story gives a picture of the life of various tribes of Indians and the land on which they lived. He also describes the animals and the plants native to the Southwest. Several people have translated his narrative from the Spanish into English. Parts of three of these translations have been used in the brief account that follows. Readers who relive his experiences must remember that he and his companions were in a strange, uncharted land, with only the sun, moon and stars to guide them. Many learned men have debated over

the route that Cabeza de Vaca followed from Texas to the West coast. It can never be accurately traced.

The Florida Wilderness

The men first discovered a village of thatched huts from which the Indians had fled. While the soldiers rummaged through the hovels, turning over earthen pots and sticks, one of them found a "golden rattle." Before the discovery of America, Indians in northern Georgia washed small amounts of gold from streams and used it for barter. In another village a few miles up the coast, they found some corn, a bit of gold, and some pieces of cloth. Here they captured four Indians, showed them the corn and the gold and by signs asked the way to more. The dazed savages pointed northward and cried, "Apalachen! Apalachen"! To the Spaniards this meant that to the north they could find much gold and much food.

So eager were the Spaniards to press northward that they took no time to explore the coast. They rode away without setting a place and time to rejoin the ships which were to sail southward and be on hand to carry away the expected treasure. Each man took two pounds of hardtack and half a pound of bacon. Soon their food was gone, and they were existing on the meager fruit of the dwarf fan-palm. After two weeks of plodding on without seeing an Indian, the searchers for golden Apalachen came to a river so wide that it took all day to cross. On the other side they found a village well supplied with corn. They took it, thanked God but not the natives, and marched on. A month later they came to a broad, deep river in which one of the men and his horse were drowned. That night they ate the horse.

An Indian was persuaded to guide them to Apalachen. He led them through a great forest in which the ground was so littered with fallen trees and often neither man nor horse could go forward. But at last they were in sight of Apalachen,

the promised land of food and gold, and the thought made them forget their hardships and weariness.

There was, indeed, corn in the forty straw hovels making up the village. But where was the gold? The Indians proved hostile, and although the Spaniards remained there twenty-five days, eating fresh corn and resting, they were unable to take a horse to water without being shot at from ambush. Among the bear, deer and other wild animals they saw there was one that Cabeza de Vaca described as follows: "It carries its young in a pouch on its belly until they are old enough to look for their own food. Even then, if an enemy appears, the mother does not move until her little ones are safe in the pouch again." This was the first written description of the opossum.

So many of the men became sick that there were not enough horses to carry them. Mosquitoes and other insects were more hostile than the Indians. The search for gold turned into a search for the ships so that they could leave this land of disease, starvation and hostile savages. The men turned towards the sea, but when they reached it they found no sign of a ship. They decided there was nothing to do but build such boats as they could and then to try to follow the shore line until they came to Pánuco, the northernmost settlement in Mexico.

But they had no tools, iron, forge, pitch or other necessities. One man in the expedition was a carpenter, but there were no shipbuilders. They also lacked food. From deerskin and a log hollowed out by fire, a soldier made a bellows. Wood could be burned into charcoal, and the bellows would force the charcoal fire to give enough heat for melting stirrups, spurs, crossbows and other metal equipment. This metal could be hammered into nails, saws, axes and the tools so desperately needed. Some of the men were sent to raid an Indian village for corn. They agreed to kill a horse

every three days for meat. Trees were brought down to be hollowed out into canoes or hewn into boards. Shirts were patched to make sails. Oars were fashioned out of poles. Meanwhile, Indians constantly attacked the workers.

Finally, however, five open boats were made. Skins of the slain horses legs were carefully saved for "bottles" in which to carry water. Before the men were ready to embark many had died of sickness and hunger, and ten had been killed by the Indians. Years later Hernando de Soto's men found horse skulls marking the place where Cabeza de Vaca's companions had worked so hard and suffered so much, and named it *Bahía de los Caballos*—Bay of the Horses.

Shipwrecked

Late in September—the season of Gulf hurricanes—247 men sailed away from the whitening skulls on the Florida sands. Cabeza de Vaca was in charge of one of the home-made boats. They had a little corn, most of it unparched. The horse-leg water bottles soon rotted. A storm drove the awkward barges ashore where there was no fresh water. For five days the voyagers thirsted and four men died from the effects of drinking sea water. Again they sailed on, found a harbor where the Indians provided food and water. Later, in a battle with them, more of Cabeza de Vaca's party were killed.

They pushed on, and found dark, fresh water flowing into the open sea. This was from the Mississippi River, which had not yet been discovered by white men. A storm drove the boats far out and scattered them. After thirst, hunger, cold, fatigue and hardship hard to describe in mere words, two of the storm-tossed boats were cast on an island near where the city of Galveston now stands. The Island of Ill Fate, the survivors called it. By this time, the men were little more than naked skeletons. "We looked like pictures of Death," Cabeza de Vaca wrote. The miserable Indians

could supply only roots and a poor type of fish. The north winds blew bitter cold. A plague swept over the survivors and spread to the Indians. The Indians became hostile.

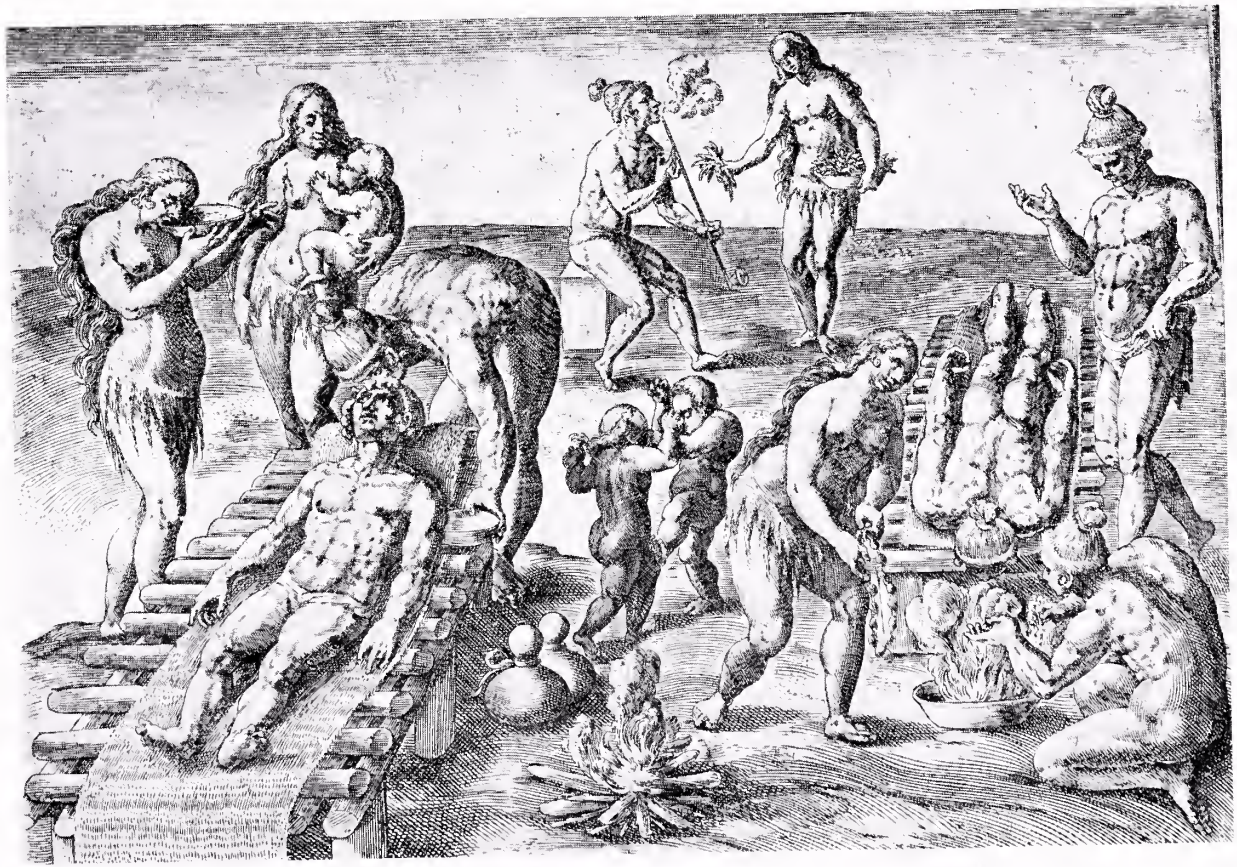
Finally, of the two boat-loads, only Cabeza de Vaca and another man were left. The other man submitted to enslavement by the Indians. Cabeza de Vaca was respected as a medicine man at first. Then, as all his treatments did not cure, he was reduced to captive rank, which he kept with the various tribes he was with. He did not give up, however. Always he sought information about the southern coast, and hoped some day to get to Mexico.

Far down the coast, almost three years after the shipwreck on the Island of Ill Fate, he found two other Spaniards and a negro slave who had escaped from one of the wrecked boats. They had remarkable tales of adventure to tell Cabeza de Vaca. These men who had set out so bravely from Spain to find gold now dug for roots, ran naked after deer, feasted in summer on tunas, starved and shivered in the winter. For three more years they were held as slaves and often cruelly treated by different tribes of the most degraded savages.

An abbreviated account of Cabeza de Vaca's story of the ways of these Indians and of his own life with them is told from his own words as follows:

Six Years with Indians on the Texas Coast

The Indians on the Island of Ill Fate wanted to make medicine men of us. The native medicine man makes a few cuts in the patient's body near the pain and then sucks the skin around the cut. He also cauterizes, then breathes on the sore place to drive the disease away. We laughed at the suggestion that we turn medicine men, but the people said we must make ourselves useful. They kept all food from us until we agreed.



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Treating the sick

We treated the sick by making the sign of the cross over them. At the same time we breathed on them and prayed to God that He cure them and have them do favors for us. God was merciful. Those we treated said they were cured. They were grateful and went without food in order to give it to us. They also gave us hides and other small things. So great was the lack of food that I often had none for three days. Neither did the Indians have any.

All the people in this country go naked. Only the women cover part of their bodies with moss from trees. Going naked among stubbly reeds to dig for roots, my body would be jabbed and cut. I had to wade barefooted in water to pull up other roots. My fingers became so tender from this work that the touch of a straw would draw blood. I could no longer bear such a life and managed to join another tribe of Indians.

Among these I improved my condition a little by becoming a trader. On account of constant warfare, there was neither barter nor travel in the land. The people I was now with depended upon me to go from one place to another to get the things they needed. I went as much as forty or fifty leagues along the coast and as far inland as I cared to go. My wares consisted mainly of seashells and cockles. Some of these shells served the Indians for cutting a bean-like fruit used for healing and in their dances and feasts. This is of great value to them, as are shell-beads and other objects.

In exchange for these things, I brought back hides and red ochre, with which they dye their faces and hair, flint for arrow heads, glue and stiff reeds to make arrows, and tassels made of deer hair dyed red. The life of a trader suited me well because it gave me liberty to go wherever I pleased. Wherever I went I was well treated, and given food for my wares. My main object was to find out how I might get farther away. I became well known, and those who did not

know me tried to meet me. I spent nearly six years among these Indians, going as naked as they did.

Their principal food was two or three kinds of roots, for which they hunted all over the land. They were usually bitter and unhealthful and it took two days to roast them. But they had so little food that they often walked two and three leagues to get them. Now and then they killed deer and at times caught fish. But often they were so hungry that they ate spiders, ant eggs, worms, lizards, salamanders and serpents. They eat earth and other things, and I believe that if there were any stones in the country they would eat them, too. They preserve the bones of the fish and animals they eat, pulverize them and eat the powder.

The women and old men have to carry burdens and loads. The women get only six hours rest out of twenty-four. They spend most of the night drying roots in the fire. At daybreak they begin to dig and carry firewood and water to their houses and attend to other chores. Most of these Indians are great thieves, liars and drunkards. They have great endurance and without resting or getting tired, they can run from morning till night after deer.

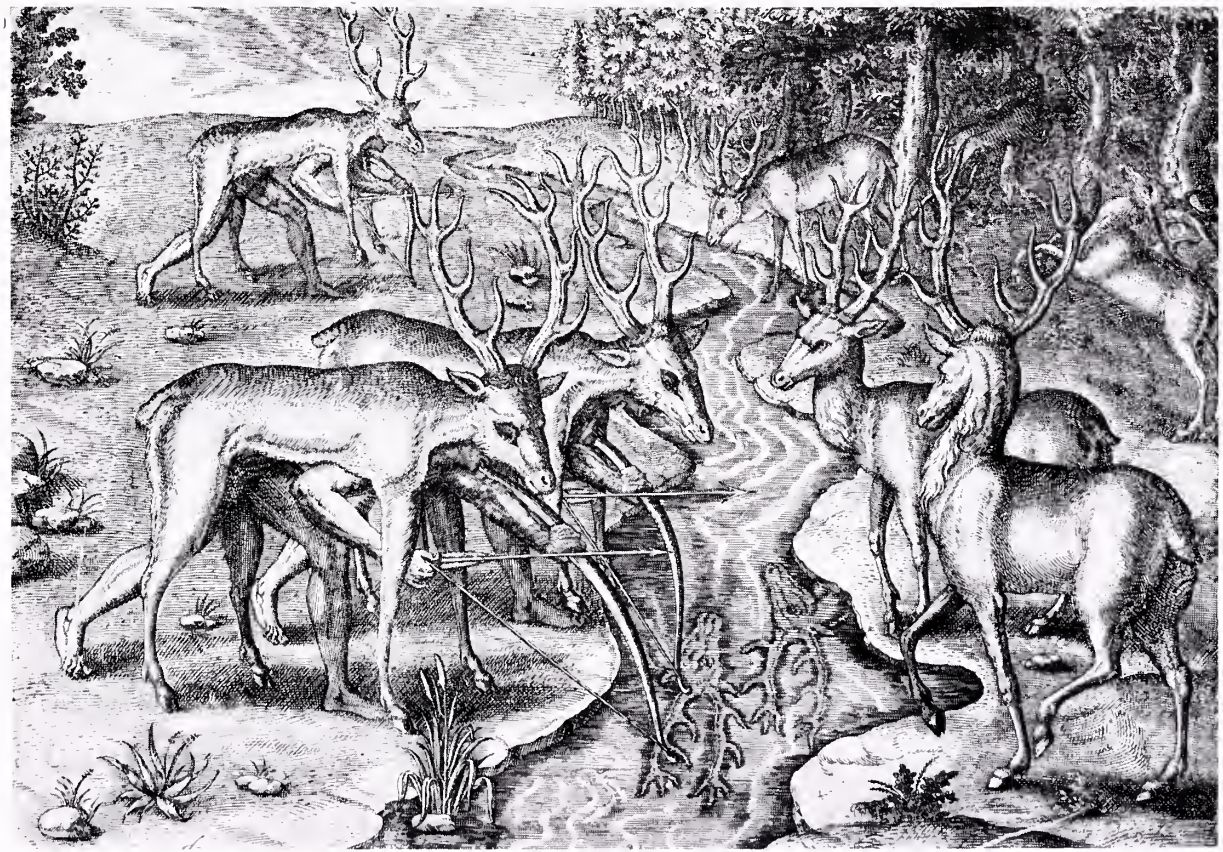
Their huts were made of matting placed over four arches. Every two or three days they put them on their backs and move in search of food. They are a very gay people, and even when almost starved they dance and celebrate their feasts. The best time of the year is when tunas are ripe. Then they have plenty of food and spend day and night in dancing and eating. So long as the tunas last, they squeeze and open them and set them to dry. When dried they are put in baskets like figs and kept to be eaten on the way. Often when we were three or four days without food, they said not to despair, for soon we would have tunas to eat and their juice to drink. Yet at that time it might be five or six months before tunas would be ripe.

But summer with its tunas, brought also many kinds of mosquitoes to torture us. To protect ourselves, we built big fires of damp, rotten wood. Then at night we wept from the smoke. Sometimes the heat of the fires was so intense that we went to the shore to rest. If we succeeded in sleeping, however, the Indians would waken us with blows and send us to kindle the fires. Farther inland the Indians go about with firebrands, setting fire to the prairies and timber to drive off the mosquitoes and to bring out of the ground lizards and other creatures they eat. They also kill deer by encircling them with fire.

All over this country there are a great many deer, fowl and other animals. Here also we came upon cows (buffaloes). I ate their meat, which is better than that of cattle in Spain. Their horns are small, like those of the Moorish cattle. Their hair is very long, like fine wool. Some are brownish and others black. The Indians make blankets of the small hides, and of the larger ones they make shoes and shields. These cows come from the north, where people live upon their flesh.

Once while we were searching for fruit of certain trees in a country without trails, I became cut off and the people returned without me. Trying to find them, I stumbled upon a burning tree and the fire kept me from freezing that night. In the morning I loaded myself with wood, took two burning sticks and set out. For five days I continued my journey, carrying with me the wood and firebrands so that if the fire went out where there was no wood I would have something of which to make torches. It was my only protection against the cold, for I went as naked as a new-born child.

Before sunset each evening I stopped along a stream. There I scratched a hole in the ground and warmed the earth with fire before lying down on it. I also built four fires around the hole and, from time to time, got up to poke them. I made bundles of the long grass that grew there and



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Herds of deer in the Southwest

covered myself with them at night. One night sparks fell on the straw while I was asleep and I was severely burned before I could jump out. During the five days, I did not eat a mouthful of food, and my bare feet bled a great deal.

Afoot Across the Continent

Despite the fact that Cabeza de Vaca had become a trader and the other two Spaniards and the negro slave were medicine men, they found it difficult to get together to travel. They were not with the same Indians, and usually the tribes met only when the tunas were ripe. The longer the Spaniards remained with the Indians, however, the more power they had over them, and the farther their fame spread as powerful healers.

In the spring of 1535, almost seven years after the expedition to Florida had been all but wiped out, the four survivors began to travel in a southwest direction. People who begged to be healed followed them. By the time mesquite beans were ripening, they were on the Rio Grande, perhaps not a great distance below the present city of Laredo. The poor natives were so anxious to touch them and to be under their protection, that bands from one tribe followed them to the camps of the next tribe. So, no matter how far they went, their fame as "children of the sun" went with or before them.

The Spaniards were from mountainous Spain, and after spending such a long, wretched time on the plains, sight of mountains in northeastern Mexico gave them great joy. Why they did not turn southward, keeping on the eastern slopes of these mountains is not clear. Westward they continued, lingering here and there to gorge at one place against hunger and thirst beyond.

Indians gave them beads, skins, pearls, even a little silver and buffalo hides. The men took part in a great rabbit

roundup in which the Indians killed hundreds of jackrabbits, as Pueblo Indians do to this day. They ate piñon nuts. Later, they passed deserts and came to fields of beans and corn. Hunters brought in black-tailed deer as well as the smaller white-tails. At one village the people made an offering of six hundred deer hearts when the men arrived.

They had now traveled far toward the Pacific, and the Indians thought them gods. Then one day one of the men saw a little buckle from a sword-belt and a horseshoe nail hanging from an Indian's neck. "Where is this from?" the Spaniard asked.

"From heaven," the Indian replied, pointing upward.

"But who brought it to you?" the Spaniard asked.

"Men with beards like yours. They wore swords and rode horses. They killed two of our people."

"Where did they go?"

"Into the sea and towards the sunset", he answered.

"Then," said Cabeza de Vaca, "we gave God many thanks for what we had heard, for we had despaired of ever hearing of Christians again. On the other hand, we were sad for fear the Spaniards had come by sea only to discover and had left again to come no more."

Then, as they pressed on through a fertile land of bountiful streams, they found fields abandoned, houses burned, and the scattered natives skulking like hunted beasts. The bearded men "from heaven" had been riding them down, capturing everyone they could for slaves. Yet the natives treated Cabeza de Vaca and his companions with so much respect and kindness that he wrote to the King of Spain: "Their conduct shows clearly how kindness, and nothing else, will bring them to Christianity and obedience to our imperial Majesty."

Spurred to new hope by finding the buckle, the men hurried onward. They had gone perhaps two hundred miles,

when one day they came to where Spaniards had slept the night before. "The next morning," Cabeza de Vaca said, "I came upon four Christians on horseback. Seeing me in such a strange attire and in company with Indians, they were greatly startled. They stared at me for a long while speechless. I spoke first, and told them to lead me to their captain, and we went together to Diego de Alcaraz, their commander.

"After I had addressed him, he said that he was himself in a plight, as for many days he had been unable to capture Indians, and did not know where to go, also that his men were facing starvation. I told him how to the rear, at a distance of ten leagues, the other two men were with many people who had guided us through the country. He at once dispatched three horsemen, with fifty of his Indians, and the Negro slave went with them as guide. I remained and asked for a statement of the date—the year, month and day—when I had met them and the condition in which I had come."

The time of this meeting with the Spaniards was March 1536. The place was the Sinaloa River, not far from the Gulf of California. Cabeza de Vaca was to travel much farther—to South America to be governor of the Territory of La Plata—but the great journey of his life, one of the great journeys of history, was over.

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